

Local News

Traffic plan would eliminate some businesses

By PATRICIA TALLENT, News-Topic County Editor

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LENOIR - A proposed single-diamond interchange at Smith's Crossroads would entirely change the intersection's appearance and eliminate businesses, including Burger King, Eckerd Drug and McDonald's, said Lenoir Planning Director Chuck Beatty. Beatty informed the council of the effect of the proposed interchange in the N.C. Department of Transportation's (DOT) preliminary Caldwell County Thoroughfare Plan at the Lenoir City Council's Committee of the Whole meeting Thursday. The plan was developed by the DOT for the county and its municipalities. It will replace the existing Lenoir-Hudson Thoroughfare Plan. The diamond interchange would make U.S. 321 North and South a continuous road. A ramp from U.S. 321 would connect motorists to N.C. 64 and 90 and to Morganton Boulevard.

"This would get rid of too much of our commercial property," commented Lenoir Mayor Pro Tem Betty Buss. Councilman Ed George said extending turn lanes on U.S. 321 would help relieve back-up traffic resulting from people trying to turn. Council members said it's difficult to get out of existing shopping centers in the Crossroads area. "You have three choices and they are all bad," Buss said. "The only solution may be a new highway somewhere else," said Councilman George Bernhardt Sr.

Through the years, the Smith Crossroads intersection has been a diamond, an oval and a crossroads, Councilman Tom Broach said. "The change helped until the traffic increased," he said.

The proposed widening of U.S. 321 South to the Catawba River bridge will put additional traffic on the road, Beatty said. With the amount of projected traffic on U.S. 321 in the future, he said some type of interchange will be needed at the Crossroads in the future. U.S. 321 at the Catawba River bridge area is already at its design capacity of 35,000 to 40,000 vehicles daily. Future projections are for 80,000 vehicles daily. One council person said a loop bypass is needed to take truck traffic off U.S. 321. "If they started trying to get the diamond interchange constructed tomorrow it would take 10 years," Bernhardt said.

After much discussion, the council agreed to ask the DOT in addition to the diamond interchange to look at alternatives to relieve traffic congestion at Smith's Crossroads. Another way to relieve traffic from U.S. 321 would be connecting to U.S. 321 the proposed construction of two-lane roads on a new location from Southwest Boulevard at U.S. 321 to Alfred Hartley Road and from Alfred Hartley Road to Wilkesboro Avenue, Bernhardt said. The roads are included in the draft Thoroughfare Plan.

Until the new interchange is constructed, the DOT plan recommends extending the northbound right turn lane on U.S. 321. Lenoir City Manager Jim Hipp said the cost is going to be more anticipated because a traffic sign will have to be moved. He said DOT officials are trying to find more money to fund the project.

Council members agreed to ask the DOT to include widening of Harper Avenue in the plan. That project has been a top priority of the city of Lenoir for years.

Council members also discussed whether to recommend that the DOT widen the existing U.S. 321 South to six lanes or make it a limited access highway and construct a parallel service road.

The DOT staff has recommended widening the existing U.S. 321 South because it would be less expensive and disturb fewer businesses and residences. The DOT estimates it would cost \$323 million to make U.S. 321 South a controlled access highway with a service road. It would displace 290 residences and 197 businesses.

The DOT estimates widening the existing U.S. 321 to six lanes would cost \$106 million

and displace 28 residences and 19 businesses. Council decided to leave the proposed widening of U.S. 321 in the thoroughfare plan.

The council also decided to ask the DOT in addition to converting from one-way to two-way Main Street from West Street to College Street to look at making Harper Avenue and West Avenue two-way streets. Council also agreed to ask the DOT to add improving Highbrite Drive to the thoroughfare plan. The council asked that the following new two-lane roads on a new location be deleted: Ridge Street to Main Street and British Woods Drive to Norwood Street. They said the DOT should consider continuing to N.C. 18 construction of a new street from Spruce Street to Delwood Drive included in the plan.

Beatty noted that the plan includes construction of the following new two-lane roads that would link Connelly Springs Road to N.C. 18, Crump Road to Orchard Road and Rocky Road to Crump Road. The thoroughfare plan also includes replacing the Harrisburg Drive bridge over Lower Creek, with construction in 2001. The city has been waiting on the bridge replacement for years.

Hipp also informed the council that the DOT will hold a meeting from 2 to 4 p.m. Nov. 8 at the J.E. Broyhill Civic Center to receive public comments on its draft Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The TIP is the long-range plan for major transportation projects.

In other business, Hipp said a city committee will be looking at a timetable for construction of the city's new greenway along Zack's Fork and Lower Creek. Bernhardt suggested the committee look at a fund raising project for benches and possibly ornamental light poles along the greenway. Benches and lights in a greenway in Newland were funded by such a project, he said.

"It would be very expensive for the city, but it would be a nice project for civic groups," he said. "We also need to look at plans for shade trees."

Hipp also reported that the DOT plans to hold a public information meeting in November on the environmental impact study on the McLean Drive-Highbrite Drive Connector. Hipp said the city hopes to put the project out to bid, award the contract and have the road under construction by the end of the calendar year. Construction of the road will probably be done through two

contracts since Lowes Home Improvements is talking about constructing the first 1,400-foot section of the road, he said. Hipp also announced that the city will rededicate the Lenoir Aquatics & Fitness Center at 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 5. After the dedication ceremony, the center will hold an open house and the swim team will be doing demonstrations. Refreshments will be served. The public is invited to attend.

As for U.S. 321 South, Erby said the first step will be for local officials to get the project on the DOT's long-range Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

The second priority project on the plan is construction of a Single Point Diamond interchange at Smith's Crossroads intersection to Greenhaven Drive. The median would have turn bays at existing signal lights. DOT officials said they have not determined the exact impact on businesses. In the interim, the DOT hopes to extend the northbound right turn on U.S. 321 on to Wilkesboro Boulevard.

"The purpose of the thoroughfare plan is to develop an urban thoroughfare plan for roads to ensure safety, improve traffic flow and travel cost, while minimizing the disruption of houses and businesses. A good transportation system is vital to economic development," Erby said.

Even though projects are included in the long-range DOT Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) nothing happens until the projects are funded, Erby said. "Once they make the TIP they can be moved forward or they can slip a year or two," he said. He urged local government officials to stay in constant contact with the DOT to ensure projects remain on the TIP and are funded.

The number one priority on the draft Thoroughfare plan is widening U.S. 321 South, Erby said. "It is a major project and will be the largest project in Division 11.

Widening existing 321 choice of DOT engineers

10-19-00

By PATRICIA TALLENT
News-Topic County Editor

BATON COMMUNITY - N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) staff recommend widening U.S. 321 South to six lanes because it would be less expensive than making it a limited access highway with a parallel service road, said N.C. Board of Transportation member Sam Erby of Granite Falls.

Erby said it would cost an estimated \$323 million to make U.S. 321 South a controlled access highway with a service road. It would displace 290 residences and 197 business. The cost of widening the existing U.S. 321 to six lanes would only be an estimated \$106 million, he said. It would displace only 28

residences and 19 businesses.

Erby made the comment during a meeting Thursday at Baton Elementary School in which Caldwell County officials were presented the DOT's preliminary Caldwell County Thoroughfare Plan. It has taken several years to get the plan completed due to changes in DOT personnel.

Caldwell County Commissioner Ron Beane expressed concern that widening the existing U.S. 321 South to six lanes "is just compounding the problem."

DOT staff encouraged the county to limit driveway access on U.S. 321 as a method to limit access on the highway.

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Erby also informed elected officials that the U.S. 321 South project like U.S. 321 North will be done in three sections. The first section to be constructed will be from Catawba County to Granite Falls. The second section will be from Granite Falls to the Loop at the end of the highway.

Motorists should be able to travel on the first section of U.S. 321 North by the end of December, Erby said. The contractor has until June 2001 to complete landscaping and other final work on that section. Construction of the second section to Blackberry Road should begin in July 2004, Erby said. It will take that long to purchase right-of-way and design and plan the project, he said.

The final section of U.S. 321 North through Blowing Rock has not been decided. "We have five groups supporting five different routes," Erby said. "We have spent \$3.1 million just studying the route. I will tell you that as a board member I will not vote to spend any more money to study the route."

Caldwell County, Lenoir, Watauga County and Boone are on record supporting the safest, most economical route, with the least environmental impact, Erby said. Blowing Rock has not endorsed any route. The DOT favors widening the existing highway. After an impact study is done on some historic areas, the DOT will be considering which route to build, he said.

As for U.S. 321 South, Erby said the first step will be for local officials to get the project on the DOT's long-range Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

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Even though projects are included in the long-range DOT Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) nothing happens until the projects are funded, Erby said. "Once they make the TIP they can be moved forward or they can slip a year or two," he said. He urged local government officials to stay in constant contact with the DOT to ensure projects remain on the TIP and are funded.

The number one priority on the draft Thoroughfare plan is widening U.S. 321 South, Erby said. "It is a major project and will be the largest project in Division 11.

"Under the best of situations even if we started today it would take seven years to get it completed."

Erby said the DOT last week let the last contract for widening U.S. 421. The project has cost \$409 million in the past three years, he said.

The Caldwell County Thoroughfare plan was completed by Kurt Freitag, the fourth engineer assigned to the project. Erby said the DOT is having trouble retaining employees, who are being recruited by the private sector. "We had 16,000 employees and now we are down to about 14,000 employees," he said. "Division 11 has 987 employees."

Freitag said the plan "is not a promise that the DOT will build the roads. That is up to Caldwell County Elected officials will have to tell the DOT that they need the roads. It also does not contain the final location of the road. The road has to go through environmental impact studies."

The county's 1992 thoroughfare plan was developed in 1992. The new plan is based on data projections through 2025. "This is only a preliminary recommendation," Freitag said. "We want feedback from elected officials. Our next step will be public information sessions to get input from the public."

Also recommended in the plan is five-laning the following roads:

- Wilkesboro Avenue from Tanglewood Drive to Blue Creek Road in Lenoir.

- McLean Drive and U.S. 321A in Lenoir with McLean Drive at U.S. 321 to Southwest Boulevard. The project is unfunded on the TIP.

- U.S. 321A from McLean Drive to Southwest Boulevard in Lenoir.
- Connelly Springs Road from Southwest Boulevard to north of Walt Arrey Road in Lenoir.

The plan recommends a five-lane Connelly Springs Road Connector from north of Walt Arrey Road to U.S. 321 in Lenoir with new interchange at U.S. 321, partly under construction. It recommends four-laning Connelly Springs Road from Southwest Boulevard to the county line in the Baton community.

Also recommended is four-laning U.S. 64/N.C. 18 from the county line to south of Calico Road with an extension of the five-lane section from south of Calico Road to Hartland Road. The project is in the TIP for construction after 2008.

It also recommends that Main Street from College Avenue to West Avenue in Lenoir be changed from a one-way street to a two-way street.

The following roads are recommended to be widened to three lanes:

- U.S. 321A from Southwest Boulevard to Pleasant Hill Road. The project is unfunded in the TIP.
- U.S. 321A from Pine Mountain Road to Central Avenue in Granite Falls. The project is unfunded in the TIP.
- Falls Avenue from west of Crestview Street to U.S. 321. The project is unfunded

in the TIP.

The plan recommends turn lanes the following roads:

- U.S. 321 at Midway Sand Place - construct northbound left turn lane. The project currently is under construction.
- Connelly Springs Road at Caja Mountain Road - construct southbound left turn lane, under construction.

The plan recommends the following two-lane roads on new locations:

- Ridge Street to Main Street in Lenoir.
- Hospital Avenue to Pennell Street in Lenoir.

- McLean Drive Extension in Lenoir. The project is in the TIP with construction scheduled for 2001.

- Southwest Boulevard - to Alfred Hartley Road in Lenoir.
- Alfred Hartley Road to Taylorsville Road (U.S. 64/N.C. 90) in Lenoir.
- Taylorsville Road to Wilkesboro Avenue (N.C. 18) in Lenoir.

- Rocky Road to Crump Road in Gamewell.
- Crump Road to Orchard Road in Cajah's Mountain.

- Orchard Road to Pleasant Hill Road in Cajah's Mountain.
- Pleasant Hill Road to Mt. Hermon Road in Hudson. The project is in the TIP to be constructed in 2008.

- Pine Mountain Road to U.S. 321 in Hudson.
- Cajah's Mountain Road to Missisippi Road in Sawmill. The project is in the TIP to be constructed in 2003.

- McCall Town Road to Premiere Road
- Hickory Nut Ridge Road to D. Ponds Road.

- Laurel Road to Central Avenue in Granite Falls.
- Dry Ponds Road to Pinewood Road in Granite Falls.

- Pinewood Road to Wkye Road in Granite Falls.
- Myers Road to U.S. 321 in Granite Falls.

- Duke Avenue to U.S. 321A in Granite Falls.
- Grace Chapel Road to N.C. 11 (Northern Connector). The project is unfunded in the TIP.

- Grace Chapel Road to N.C. 11 (Southern Connector). The project is unfunded in the TIP.
- It also includes the following bridge replacements:

- Broadway Street over Blairs Fork Creek, construction 2004.
- Mulberry Street over Lower Creek, construction 2004.

- Harrisburg Drive over Lower Creek, construction 2001.
- Smokey Creek Road over Smokey Creek, under construction.

- Dead Mill Road over Gunpowder Creek, construction 2002.
- Lower Cedar Valley Road over Little Gunpowder Creek, construction 2001.

- U.S. 321 over the Catawba River rehabilitate deck bridge in 2008.